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ABSTRACT

Research in the teaching of second/foreign languages has called for an emphasis on interactional competence, or the ability to think and behave as an interactional partner in a second language. The aim of this paper is to find out if the specific interactional skills acquired by students through their first language experience are automatically carried over to second language use and if this transfer is beneficial in developing interactional competence in the second language. Specifically the paper investigates the turn-taking behavior of eight Chinese students from Taiwan participating in graduate classes at an American university. Three patterns of participation were identified: active; passive verbal; and silent/near zero. J. J. Schumann's acculturation model and his pidginization/language acquisition analogy are used to explain the differences in participation demonstrated by the Taiwanese students. It is concluded that native culture plays a vital part in shaping non-native students' ability to acquire interactional competence in English as a Second Language. (Contains 10 references.) (LR)

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American Group Discussion Patterns as Viewed by ESL Students: The Turn-taking Behavior of Eight Chinese Students Studying in America

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Abstract

Research in the teaching of second/foreign languages has called for an emphasis on interactional competence, which is the ability to organize one's thoughts and manipulate one's role as an interactional partner in a second language. Understandably, second language students have already developed a rich repertoire of culture specific interactional skills from their first language experience. The aim of this study is to find out if these skills are automatically carried over when students are using a second language, and if such a transfer is beneficial in developing interactional competence in the second language. Specifically, the paper investigated the turn-taking behavior of eight Chinese students from Taiwan when they participated in American classes.

Data for the analysis were collected from three graduate classes at an American university. Based on the coding system developed by Rogers and Farace, three patterns of participation were identified. They were: Active Participation, Passive Verbal Participation, and Silent/Near Zero Participation. Schumann's acculturation model and his analogy regarding pidginization and language acquisition were employed to explain the differences in participation demonstrated by Taiwanese students. In conclusion, it is suggested that in addition to personality factors and learning styles, native culture plays a vital role in shaping Taiwanese students' reaction to the target culture. ESL students, therefore, have to be more aware of the strengths and weaknesses that their cultures give them in order to be able to acquire interactional competence. The support from teachers and fellow American students is also crucial in their language acquisition process.

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American Group Discussion Patterns As Viewed by ESL Students -- The Turn-taking Behavior of Eight Taiwanese Students Studying in America[1]

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Introduction

Research in the teaching of a second/foreign language has called for an emphasis on interactional competence, which is the ability to organize one's thoughts and manipulate one's role as an interactional partner in a second language (Kramsch, 1986, Rivers, 1986). Attaining interactional competence is, in fact, one of the major goals of many foreign students studying in the United States. Such a goal is not impossible to attain as there are students who have demonstrated this ability. However, for many students, this goal is still difficult to reach. This paper attempts to look at a more basic question underlying the issue: the influence of one's cultural background on classroom participation in a foreign setting. Research in the ethnography of speaking has shown that there are considerable cross-cultural differences in discourse patterns (Sherzer, 1977). Ostensibly, second language learners have already developed a set of interactional skills, which are culture specific, from their previous learning experiences. Are such skills being transferred when they use a second language? Is the transfer beneficial or harmful in their interaction with the native speakers? Specifically, this project investigates the turn-taking behavior of eight Chinese graduate students from Taiwan when they were studying in the American classroom.

Methodology

Subjects

My subjects were eight Chinese students majoring in education from three graduate level classes. Their length of stay in the States ranged from three months to about a year. Half of the subjects majored in English when they were undergraduates in Taiwan.

In Taiwan, students begin to study English when they are in junior high; the study of English, however, is not given a heavy emphasis in the secondary school. Nevertheless, it is a compulsory subject in the first two years of college. In general, students have few chances to use the language outside the English classes. Only two of the eight students in this study had some

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exposure to the language when they worked in Taiwan after graduation.

Data Collection

A one-hour session of each of the three graduate classes was videotaped for data analysis in March and October of the same year. The first class had 18 students, two being foreign (one Chinese and one Japanese). The second class had 14 students, four of whom were Chinese. The third class had 11 students with four from Taiwan. I visited each of the classes, and stayed for about an hour before videotaping. Handwritten notes were taken on the interaction patterns when the teachers were lecturing. The first class was taped in a large group setting when the discussion session began. The second and third classes were taped when the class was divided into two small groups. Questionnaires were distributed to the students immediately after class for their own evaluation of the participation. The Chinese students were invited for interviews about two weeks later.

Data Analysis

A coding system based on Rogers and Farace (1975) was used to code the turns of the participants in the videotaped sessions. A turn is defined as the act of taking the floor, which begins when one speaker starts talking, and ends when he/she stops talking and another participant begins to talk. Each turn is coded in the form of three digits: the first digit designates the speaker, the second digit the grammatical form of the turn, and the third digit the function of the turn.

Under the form category, there are five elements:

1. An *assertion* is a statement.
2. A *question* is an interrogative.
3. A *talk-over* refers to an interruption of an ongoing turn.
4. A *noncomplete* refers to incomplete thoughts, e.g., "Let's see, that was in...."; or the use of phrases and incomplete sentences to get the message across, e.g., "Any pain, see the assistant."
5. *Interjection* refers to comments, e.g., "That's great!"

In the function category, there are seven elements:

1. *Support* refers to both the giving and seeking of agreement, assistance, acceptance and approval, e.g., "Yes, that is true."
2. *Nonsupport* denotes disagreement, rejection, demands, and challenges, e.g., "That's effect, we're talking objectives now."
3. *Elaboration*: adding more details on the point discussed by the previous speakers, e.g., "I see what you're saying, but I'd

like to add that the phenomenon is not restricted to the classroom."

4. *Moving topic forward*: shows the participant's active involvement in topic management, e.g. "Now let's get down to effect."
5. *Answer* is a response to a question which has substance and commitment, e.g., "It was June 9th."
6. *Disconfirmation* occurs when the following speaker does not respond to a demand for response by the previous speaker.
7. *Clarification* is the act of either giving or asking for clarification. (All the examples above were taken from the data of the videotaped sessions.)

After coding the turns, the participation of the Chinese students was calculated according to the turns that they had taken in the videotaped sessions. Three categories emerged from the data in terms of verbal participation: active, passive, and silent/near zero participation. The information from the interviews and questionnaires served as important clues for ascertaining possible causes for each of the patterns.

Findings

Typically, a graduate class in an American university is characterized by a free interchange of communication between the professor and the students. A student can interrupt the teacher at various points to clarify, elaborate, and comment on the substance of the lecture. American students are accustomed to expressing their opinions. No one will be penalized for raising a question or making a little digression because interaction is regarded as a normal way of learning. These patterns were exemplified in my data collected from the three classes.

The American way of learning is in contrast to the way in which Taiwanese students were brought up. In Taiwan, there are few discussions even in graduate classes. The teacher is the authority in the classroom. Students are the listeners, and they would feel embarrassed if they ask "stupid" questions. When Taiwanese students study in the American classroom, such values and experiences are transferred in the following ways:

1. Slow response because of inability to expand a point on its different dimensions in a short length of time.
2. A student often worries if the question he/she wants to ask is a sensible one.
3. Spending a lot of time thinking how to phrase the question; as a result, the chance for asking that question has elapsed for a long time when finally the question comes into shape. In certain cases, the student may have lost track of the lecture when he/she is thinking about how to ask that question.

Based on the data, three patterns can be observed with regard to verbal participation:

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Active Participation

The data were from the discussion group of the second class, in which there were seven participants including three Chinese students. The discourse patterns of the American students were characterized by:

1. False starts, especially in the speech of the captain; utterances were occasionally marked by repetitive words.
2. Talk-over - the next speaker/s began to speak when the previous speaker had not yet finished.
3. A continuous flow of speech; utterances were mostly contiguous.
4. Participants were competing for turns, but smoothly and naturally.
5. Turns were self-selected.
6. Good nonverbal communication with each other.
7. There were occasionally short moments of silence lasting between 5 and 10 seconds.

Two of the three Chinese students in this session were very active in the entire hour of discussion. Their discourse patterns were marked by the following:

1. They talked-over, and interjected remarks and comments right at the point where the previous speaker finished. (It seems to me that this was something that they had learned from the American students in the group, whose tempo of discourse was characterized by these two features.)
2. Turns were mostly content-oriented. Usually, they were adding substantial content to the ongoing discussion; seldom did they just repeat what the previous speaker had said.
3. Hand gestures were used to complement one's inadequacy of language.

The participation of the first Chinese student, Kim, was 15.92%, which was comparable to the American students (Leader: 28.5%, the second American student: 15.64%, the third American student: 16.75%, the fourth American student:12.89%).[2] Kim had good language ability as many of her turns consisted of well-structured sentences. Her turns were marked by talk-overs and appropriate interjections. In addition, she did not mind if some of her suggestions were refuted, or if some of her demands were not responded to. She knew that this was part of the norm in class discussion. In the interview, Kim said that she was learning to organize herself in order to express herself clearly, and to persuade others to accept what she said. The following transcription illustrates some of the characteristics in her participation.

L: to develop=
=G: well, to develop (unclear, pause)
Kim: develop (with a laughing tone probably because of the long pauses) oral hygiene?=
=L: okay, one of the goals will be to have daily dental care on a daily basis=

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=G: well, the goal (high tone) should be, I think, well, that's
Kim: [one (unclear) objective or goal]
=Kim: that should be objective
M: [yeah, the goal]
G: [yeah, the goal, the big one]
L: okay=
=M: you just narrow=
=Kim: (very skilful in interjection) so goal should be develop
(pause)
Shu: what are you talking about
all: yeah

Legend: L: Group leader (American student)
G: American student
M: American student
Kim and Shu: pseudonyms for two of the Chinese students
All: All participants
= contiguous with the previous turn
[ ] overlapping utterances
( ) narration from the investigator

The second student, Bon, had limited language ability as his turns were mostly noncompletes. However, his participation was 10.3%. He used a lot of hand gestures to help him get his meanings across. It was almost customary that he would laugh or make his team members laugh each time when he spoke. He believed that he could communicate with others much more easily if he maintained a harmonious atmosphere, as was exemplified by the following transcription.

L: to keep (pause) healthy teeth or good
G: just teeth because (laughing)
Bon: could, keep'em good teeth (laughing)
A: big, fat teeth, in working order, 80% of it (laughing)
Bon: yeah, yeah, so that they
can enjoy food, eh
Kim: (laughing) [to enjoy food]
Bon: eh
L: okay
Bon: which
= A: and in the construction objectives, students would
be able to brush and for all
G: [so they (high tone)]
Kim: yeah, that's the end of class performance

Legend: A: American student
Bon: pseudonym for the Chinese student

Acculturation is one of the most important variables explaining why students from the same cultural background behave

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differently in the American classroom. One characteristic shared between Kim and Bon is that they both strongly believe that participation is a better way of learning. Kim said, "I am one of the group, and my participation influences the direction of the group." Bon agreed and said that interaction helped develop intelligence. Kim and Bon were the two students who had some exposure to the language when they worked in Taiwan. Owing to previous exposure and their identification with the way of learning in the American classroom, they have acculturated much more readily. In fact, Kim had enrolled at the adult learning center for a year before doing graduate studies, and Bon reported that he seized every chance to practise his language whenever he saw a native speaker.

Passive Verbal Participation

The data were based on the third videotaped session. Four students, including one American who was the group leader for their class project, participated in the discussion. The entire one-hour discussion was led by the American student, who did most of the talking. The participation was 58% for the leader, 17% for each of the first two Chinese students, and 8% for the third one.[3] The percentage showed a big difference in terms of the quantity of the turns between the American and the Chinese students. The American student's turns were characterized by long elaborations. On the other hand, the Chinese students mainly asked questions, gave short comments and followed the agenda set by the American student, with turns complemented by hand gestures. However, if one would also consider the nonverbal expressions, the Chinese students were in fact very responsive. The following transcript serves to illustrate the characteristics mentioned above.

L: when will we decide on treatment uh that maybe will help us a little bit more. Do you have anything what music we go along with that treatment? What type of person, you know, humorous making
M & Y: [ng ng]
one in person to be that person, okay (laughing) may be we could decide on a treatment and may be we could come up with some of the answers to some of those questions, do you think?
M: uh=
=F: anything about treatment, it's only a video game
=L: well, but this would be uh this would be a realist
F: [uh uh]
maybe treatment figure coming in, well because we are going to have to do it no matter what, we have to do it, we have to write, uh, what type of treatment that we're going to use, and why we're going to use it. I think the theme of the video is like what you said, you can't do anything with it. See if some of those treatment works=
=M: if we this animation (simulation), is that enough for our

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program, I mean=
=L: I think you can have several different types
of treatment=
=F: of course, in this realistic situation,
stimulation and= what humor=
=M: humor and some funny
L: okay, do you want to make it
something humorous, in this type of construction

Legend: L: Group leader (American student)
F: Fang
M: Ming pseudonyms for the three Chinese students
Y: Yun Yun

The interviews with the three Chinese students in this group demonstrated some very interesting phenomena pertinent to second language learning theory:

The pidginization and depidginization continuum.

The first student, Fang, has been in the University for one year. His learning exemplifies the process in which pidginization gradually becomes depidginization.[4] In the first quarter, Fang saw a great social and psychological distance between himself and the target culture. Socially, he had limited contact with the native speakers because he was new (limited length of stay). Therefore, he always stayed with Chinese students (intragroup cohesiveness). He perceived a great difference between his classroom training in Taiwan and in America (low congruence). Psychologically, he often worried that he would appear comic in a second language. This is known as "language shock," which is the result of a high degree of self-awareness and low ego permeability characterized by adults learning a second language. Therefore, he could not participate with confidence and avoided participation. He sat in the corner of the classroom and clearly felt that he was not part of the group. Fang recalled: "I was afraid to speak because I spoke with an accent; my speech is not fluent; I was worried if the other students would have the patience to listen to me, and I always kept on thinking if I should ask this question." This is the pidginization period during which the learner is separated and alienated from the target group.

However, because of his support for participation as a good way of learning, be began to acculturate. He believes that it is through interaction and participation that he will have a greater depth of understanding and retention of the course materials. In the second quarter, he still did not participate successfully, partly because of cultural constraints and partly because he had not yet come across a conducive environment. The breakthrough came in the third quarter when he had a very encouraging teacher and a small class. When the social and psychological distance decreased, depidginization occurred, enabling Fang to become more

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like the target group and participate like the rest of the students. In the fourth quarter, he met another good teacher and had a group of very supportive classmates, who respected and appreciated each other's opinions. Fang felt very relaxed and contributed his opinion without difficulty. At this stage, although he still spoke with an accent and not all his utterances were well-formed, language was not a barrier.

Learning style.

The second student, Ming, likes the format of discussion and free interaction. However, owing to the many problems mentioned above (slow response, non-fluency, and worries about other students' reaction), she would not take a very active role in the discussion. At first, she would blame herself and feel very uncomfortable for not being able to participate well. Later, she began to assimilate and think that everyone has a different style of learning. She decided that she could learn more by listening to others' questions and comments. She prefers to approach the American students on an individual basis, rather than in a group setting.

Personality factor.

The third student, Yun Yun, has been in the United States for one year. She still suffers for not being able to participate in class. She thinks that discussion is a good way of learning. However, she is so worried about making mistakes in her speech that she avoids speaking. She admits that she is an introvert, and has never become determined to take positive steps to solve her problem.

Silent/Near Zero Verbal Participation

The silent category is characterized by very limited verbal participation, with less than three turns during the entire one-hour videotaping session. The data came from three Chinese women students, who participated in the first and second videotaped sessions. Two of them majored in English when they were in Taiwan. One major factor explaining their limited verbal participation was that they were new students, either in their first or second quarter of course work in America. They perceived a great distance between themselves and the target culture. Another factor was personality: two of the students identified themselves as introverts, not used to speaking in front of a large group of people. A third factor was that they were still struggling with both their English listening and speaking skills.

One of the students, Shu, was especially weak in listening comprehension. She had difficulty following the lecture, and simply could not understand her fellow classmates if they spoke rapidly with a southern accent. Therefore, it was almost impossible for her to participate.

Kung, another new student, always found herself alienated from the American students and hence detached from the discussion for similar reasons: language shock and a perceived dissimilarity. She was always worried that the American students could not understand her. In addition, her fellow classmates always spoke and responded so quickly that she did not know when to jump in the discussion. However, she would say something if she was asked; she would also try to interject her comments in the moments of silence when the group members stopped talking. Like Shu, she felt very frustrated for not being able to participate.

A third student, Xia, would participate only when she had something substantial to contribute to the class, which was a typical transfer of values from her own culture. Since the subject matter of the course was new to her, she was silent almost all of the time.

Malinowski says that every person has a need to communicate with the others, which is true even among students who are silent on the outside. A common psychological characteristic of the silent students is that they all feel very frustrated and upset after class. As a result, it is even harder for them to build up their confidence to participate. This is a feature of the pidginization period when the learners' behavior deviates from the target norm. Depidginization occurs if the learners identify with the learning values of interaction and begins to acculturate after a longer stay in the United States. However, the crucial point lies in whether the learner has the will power to take the

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necessary steps to achieve the goal, and whether he/she has come across a conducive environment.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The Taiwanese students in this study perceived a big difference between the discourse patterns of the American classroom and the Chinese classroom. However, all the eight students in this study agreed that being able to participate in discussion and interaction in the classroom is a better way to learn. Therefore, there were different degrees of acculturation for the individuals depending on how determined and how strongly motivated they were. Even when Taiwanese students want to participate fully in class, they are still constrained by many cultural factors. Because of their cultural background, they are not used to correcting the teacher and expressing their own feelings and thoughts openly. In addition, they tend to ask brief and direct questions to avoid unnecessary mistakes.

Data from the tapes show that American students also have many false starts and noncomplete responses in their speech. Many Chinese students may be deterred from speaking because of the misconception that they have to produce well-structured utterances.

The questionnaires also show some very interesting phenomena. Of the five questionnaires from the Chinese students, four said they were not satisfied with their performance and they did not know the conversational rules. In addition, they agreed that participation in class was an important training in graduate studies. On the other hand, the six questionnaires returned by the American students said they were all satisfied with their performance, and they knew the conversational rules.

Both Chinese and American students pointed out that a familiarity with the materials is a crucial point in determining whether they can participate successfully. The American students also think that a teacher who encourages participation and discussion is very helpful in mobilizing everyone to participate. In addition, one has to feel comfortable with one's fellow classmates. For Chinese students, an encouraging teacher and supportive classmates are especially important in helping them to shorten the social and psychological distance. In addition, working in small groups will be conducive to participation.

The discussion above is confined to the data of the eight students in this study. Since participation involves many variables such as personality, learning style, language ability, and the nature of the course materials, I do not claim generality of the above patterns for other Taiwanese students. Studies with

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larger samples have to be conducted to see if the patterns identified above are typical of Taiwanese students.

Being able to participate and interact in the American classroom provides the foundation for international students to acquire interactional competence. However, as discussed above, international students are constrained by their cultural background when reacting to the target culture. If students are more aware of the effects of their cultures on their participation, they will be more successful in acquiring interactional competence in a second language. In addition, teachers and native speakers can be tremendously helpful if they are fully aware of the difficulties that international students experience in participating in the American classroom.

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Notes

[1] This paper is the third of a series of papers that I have done in the area of the development of oral proficiency in a second language. In the first paper, I proposed a three-step model to achieve oral proficiency. The first two steps emphasize training in the basic structures of the second language (segmental and suprasegmental features); the third step calls for the development of interactional competence, which according to many researchers is an ability that develops concurrently as a child develops his/her language. The general question that led to the subsequent papers is whether a second-language student, who has already had a certain degree of strategic competence, will transfer his cultural discourse (speaking) strategy when interacting in a second language, and whether that transfer is beneficial or harmful. In the second paper, I looked at a set of data on the discussion format of American graduate students. Chinese students coming from the three different geographical regions (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China) have a different degree of perceived similarity when they compared the data (the discussion patterns of the American students) with their own cultural patterns. The difference is smaller from the perspective of a Hong Kong student, and much greater from the viewpoints of students from Taiwan and Mainland China. The paper ended with the speculation that "acculturation" might be an important variable that could help Chinese students to participate more successfully in an American classroom despite cultural differences. This paper (the third in the series), which looked at the turn taking behavior of Taiwanese students, provided important evidence to this supposition.

[2] Pseudonyms were used for all students in the study. All the calculations were based on two times of watching the data from the videotapes, not on transcription. Since there were no noticeable differences between the lengths of the turns of the participants, each participant was allocated a point when he/she took a turn.

[3] Since there was a noticeable difference between the length of turns in this group, the American student's turns were calculated by doubling the actual number of turns she had taken to account for the length factor.

[4] These two concepts were borrowed by Schumann (1978a, 1978b) and Andersen (1979) from the study of pidgin languages to illustrate processes in second language acquisition. Pidginization occurs when the learners moves away from the norms of the target language because of social and psychological distance. Depidginization occurs when the learner moves towards the target norm with the shortening of the distance. Here, however, I was

not referring to the forms of the learner's language, but rather to the process.

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